H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Barbara T. Gates, ed. *In Nature's Name: An Anthology of Women's Writing and Illustration, 1780-1930.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xxvi + 673 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-28446-0; $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-28444-6.

Reviewed by Chien-hui Li (Wolfson College, University of Cambridge)
Published on H-Nilas (June, 2002)

Nature and Women's Writings

Nature and Women's Writings

This anthology of women's writing and illustration on nature from 1780 to 1930 is an outgrowth of Gates's previous work *Kindred Nature*, which interweaved a gendered narrative on science, nature and literature with the writings of Victorian and Edwardian women. In this work, Gates recedes into the background and lets around seventy women, some well-known and some more obscure, speak directly for themselves and for the natural world around them. The result is a first anthology of nature writing by women that includes not only women's prose and poetic writings but also fictional pieces and illustrations.

The anthology of over a hundred pieces is organized thematically into seven sections: "Speaking Out," "Protecting," "Domesticating," "Adventuring," "Appreciating," "Popularizing Science," and "Amateurs or Professionals?-" These are then further divided into subsections, such as "Anti-vivisection," "The Horrors of Sport," "Romanticism," "Aestheticism," "The Color of Life," "Farming and Gardening," "Kinds of Science Popularization," "Women and Darwin," and "Seaweeds, Zoophytes and Women" that guide readers into a focused center of discussion or representation. The anthology represents a variety of experiences: women who spoke for their sex and for nonhuman animals, who domesticated the family and wild life, who ventured into nature through their physical presence and sympathetic imagination, who participated in the lively culture of science popularization, and who contributed to the growth of popular interest in the natural world.

In the genre of nature-oriented literature, where a generally accepted classification has yet to be developed, the arrangement Gates adopts in this collection is a practical one that closely reflects the culture of nature writing from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. It thus not only presents a nature-oriented literary past of women but also offer readers valuable points of entry into some of the broader themes of the period such as gender relations, scientific and literary cultures, science popularization, popular interests in natural history, as well as animal protection and nature preservation. By including fictional as well as nonfictional works, Gates also avoided the common tendency to focus exclusively on prose writings when discussing nature-oriented literature.

At the end of the work are concise biographical sketches of the women writers and a chronology that places their writings into the larger literary, scientific, social, and feminist political contexts of their time. A useful bibliography of primary and secondary literature on themes touched on in the anthology, such as gender and science studies, is also provided.

In general, this is an essential work for readers interested in women's nature writings in the long nineteenth century in Britain and in related academic discussions. However, more than just being a useful work for general interest and consultation, *In Nature's Name* also embodies a strong social vision and fits within established traditions of feminist scholarship and ecocriticism. In the short introductory essays to each section, Gates presents an ecologically conscious and highly differentiated view of women and men in relation to the natural world. According to this view, women responded to the dominant mental construct for women at the time either by accepting conventional roles or by challenging the place assigned them. Thus while many women moralized science, protected weaker species, domesticated animals and plants, taught the young with moralizing tales about nature, and beautified life with aesthetic touches, all in traditional ways, there was also no lack of women who perceived women and nonhuman animals as suffering under the same hierarchical domination of men, defied the system of things, competed with their male col-

leagues, and struggled against male exclusiveness in the worlds of literature and science. All these varied experiences constituted the unique character of women's encounters with the natural world and produced a wealth of writings possessing distinctive characteristics from that of men which Gates wishes to recover from historical oblivion and establish as a tradition of female writings on nature.

If taken as a historical project, there is much that Gates could do to develop her underlying thesis of the uniqueness of women's engagement with nature into a more convincing account of women's participation in the nature-related spheres of life that involved British society in the long nineteenth century. A closer contextual attention to the common culture of which both men and women were part–for example, the growing sensibility towards other animal species and sublime feelings towards nature untainted by human ego–would reveal that the special qualities perceived by Gates in women's literary works can also be easily detected in writings of numerous male naturalists or lovers of nature. However, as a building block to a tradition of women's writings and a celebratory tribute to many neglected and long-forgotten British women who, no less than their male counterparts, so intimately and passionately engaged with nature and all its inhabitants, *In Nature's Name* certainly has achieved its purposes.

Regardless of its organizing frameworks and underlying thesis, the anthology itself constitutes a rich mine for readers with all sorts of different interests in nature. For those interested in animal rights, there are some important historical documents produced by the anti-vivisection campaign such as Frances Power Cobbe's dramatic piece "Science in Excelsis," in which a group of angels exercised their right as superior beings to vivisect some trembling physiologists, or the extract from Louise Lind-af-Hageby's *The Shambles of Science*–a controversial text that eventually led to the famous Brown Dog riots in the early twentieth century. Women hunters, mountaineers, and fishers are represented by pieces from hunting literature and travel books such as *How I Shoot My Bears*, *A Sportswoman in India*, *Six Months in the Sandwich Islands*, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, and *The Indian Alps and How We Crossed Them*, all written by women who had left records of their adventurous expeditions in exotic places in the imperialist age. For those who expect to see a more standard selection of writings by more or less established women writers on their aesthetic engagement with nature, there are also poems or prose writings by Christina Rossetti, Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, Mary Webb, Eliza Cook, Beatrix Potter, Eliza Brightwen and Vernon Lee. Finally, there are also works by women science popularizers and professionals who engaged with nature through the lens of science and left for us either their reflections on women in science or straightforward scientific writings on topics as varied as the structures of the eye, the evolution of life forms, bird life, hedgehogs and seaweeds.

It is, however, by no means possible to include all writings that deserve some space in a collection such as *In Nature's Name.* For example, the writings of Edith Carrington, dedicated animal defender and author of numerous volumes of moralizing animal tales and natural history works for children, are not included. The popular sensational novelist Ouida, who often revealed her fierce love for animals in her works and had a memorial drinking fountain (paid for by a *Daily Mirror* memorial fund) dedicated to her sympathy for animals at her birthplace in Bury St. Edmunds in 1908, was also left out of this volume. Yet such omissions justify even more a first collection of its kind, and Gates has done a good job in giving voice to a very representative group of women writers who have left for us their wonder and passion for the natural world.

All in all, this is an anthology that can potentially attract a wide range of readers. Not only historians and literary scholars, but also ecofeminists, storytellers, nature lovers, or indeed anyone who is interested in getting glimpses of women's unique engagements with the natural world should find many points of interest in this rich collection.

Note: Excerpts from several pieces from *In Nature's Name*, including "Science in Excelsis" and *The Indian Alps and How We Crossed Them* (both mentioned in this review), are available on the publisher's web site at http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/284468.html.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Chien-hui Li. Review of Gates, Barbara T., ed., *In Nature's Name: An Anthology of Women's Writing and Illustration, 1780-1930.* H-Nilas, H-Net Reviews. June, 2002.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6390

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.